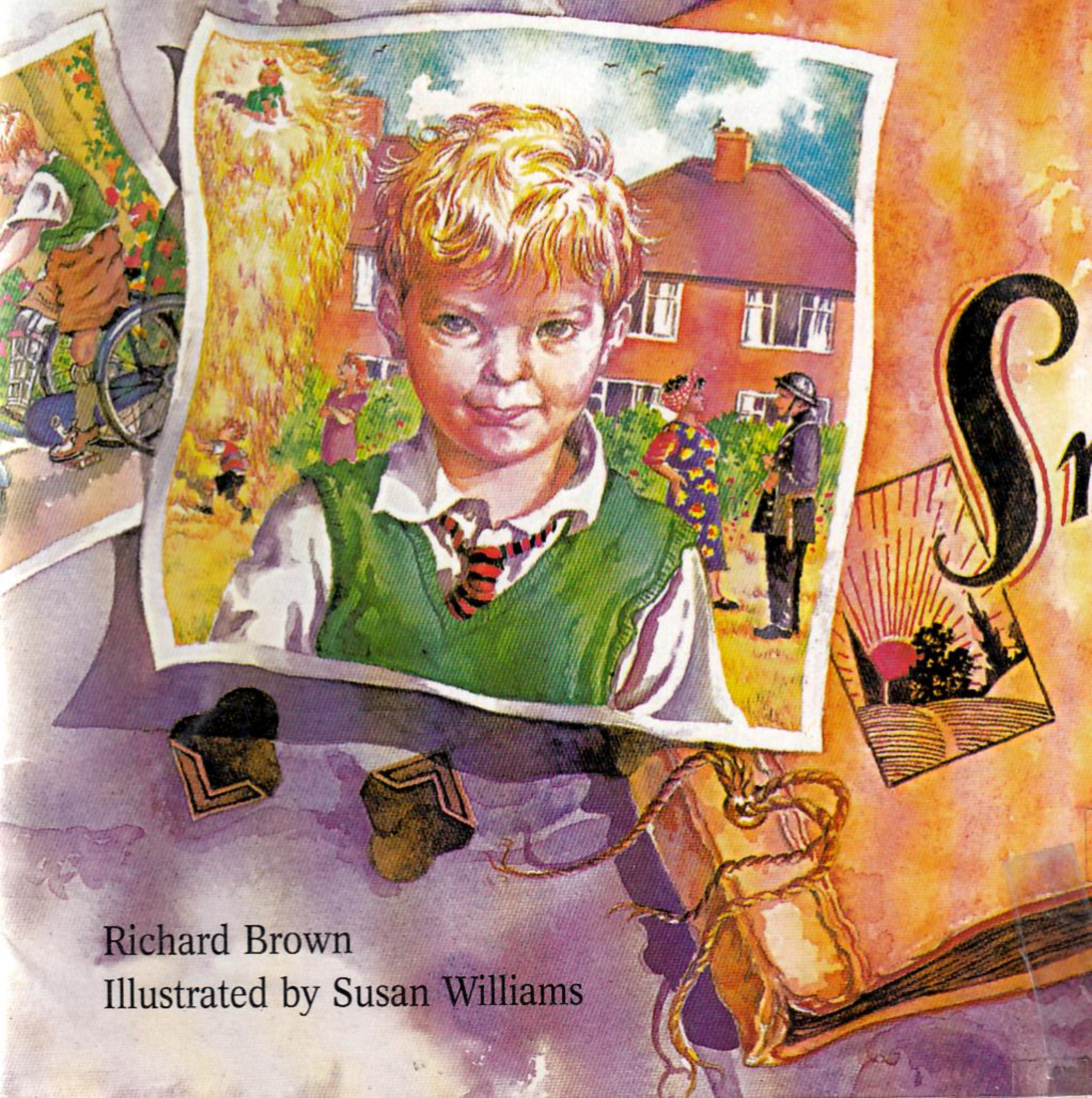




The Haystack



Richard Brown
Illustrated by Susan Williams

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I'm Joan and this is my little brother, Brian.

In 1943, during the Second World War, we lived by a field in which there was a giant haystack.





No-one seemed to want that haystack – except us children. We loved to climb up it. We felt on top of the world up there.



A family of rats had set up home in the haystack. Sometimes you could hear them rustling in there.

We used to wait, silent and still, until they popped out. Then we tried to catch them, or we chased them across the stubble. I don't think that we ever caught one because they ran too fast.







Our mums didn't like the rats being in the haystack. They said the rats were full of horrible germs. They even asked the fire-fighters to burn our haystack and kill all the rats.

Luckily for us, the fire-fighters said no. They said that the hay might be needed, and that the fire might attract German bombers.

Brian loved that haystack. He would climb up it like a monkey and jump about on top of it, shouting his head off. He always went too near the edge.



I think our mums should have been more worried about the height of the haystack than about the family of rats inside it. Especially after what happened to Brian.

One day, Brian went too near the edge of the top of the haystack. All of a sudden, it gave way. He cried out as he toppled over. I heard him thump to the ground. I froze in horror.



I peered over the edge. My heart nearly stopped.
There lay Brian, crumpled, still and silent.

I shouted to him. "Brian!" Silence. I screamed at him.
"Brian!" Silence.

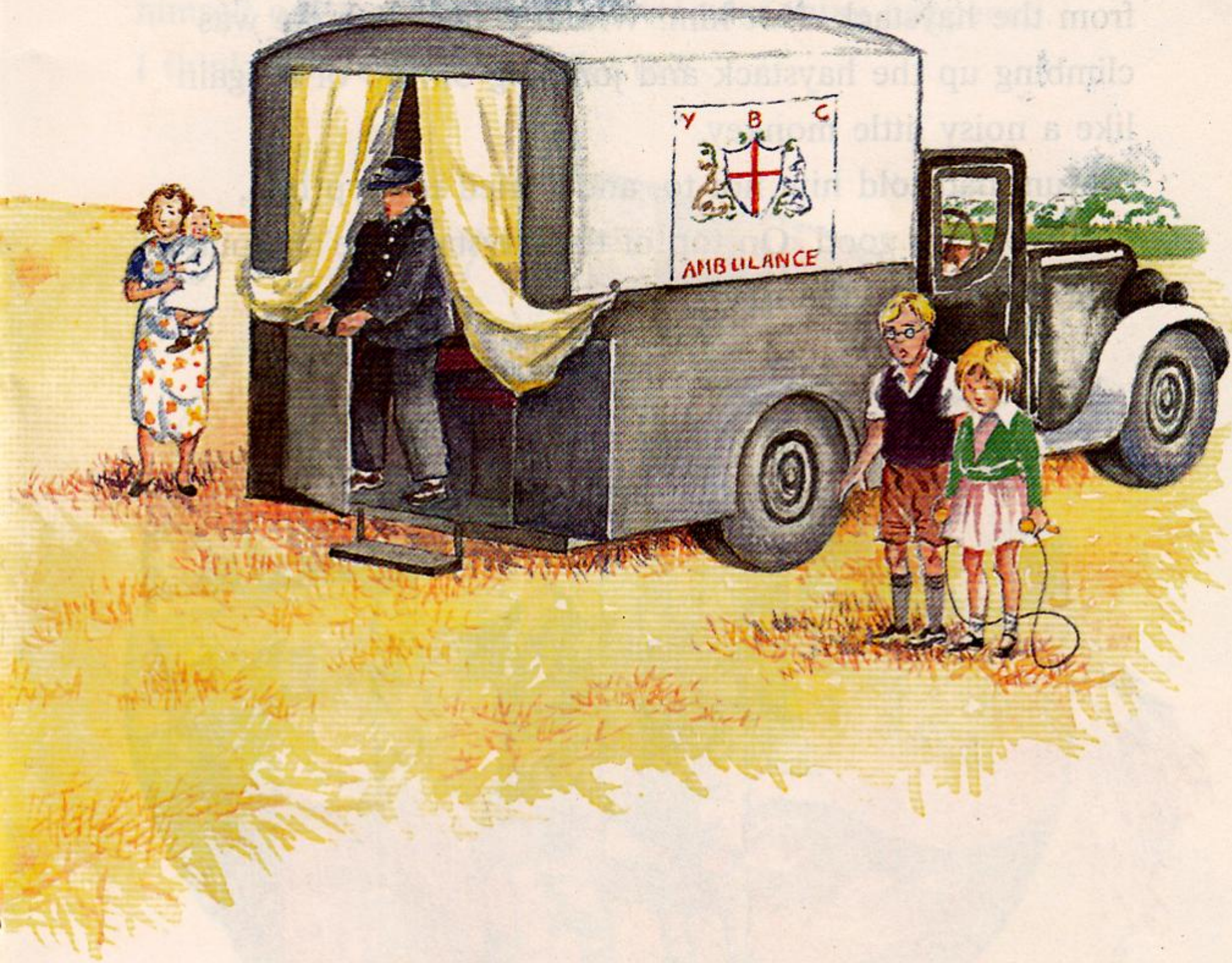
I slid down and shook him. He did not move.





I raced home for help. There was no-one there.
In a panic, I ran about screaming, "Mum! Mum!"
She heard me and came running from a field. I told her
about Brian.





As we ran down to the haystack, we heard the ambulance bell ringing. When we got there, Brian was just being put into the ambulance. He gave us a little grin. Thank goodness!

After that, I thought that Brian would keep well away from the haystack. Not him. Within a few days, he was climbing up the haystack and jumping on top of it again like a noisy little monkey.

Mum had told him not to, and I tried to stop him, but it was no good. On top of the haystack, he'd shout, "I'm the king of the castle."



It was only a few weeks after Brian had knocked himself out that the really spectacular thing happened. I think that it happened like this . . .



Two boys, who were a bit older than Brian, did something really naughty. They stole a box of matches.



Then, worse than stealing the matches, they lit a little fire not far from the haystack.

Brian was on top of the haystack and he watched them do it. He watched them very carefully.

Then he climbed down and walked slowly up to the fire.



I was lying on my back, making pictures out of the clouds. So I can't be quite sure what happened next.





I heard the boys shoo Brian away. I think that they even threatened him. The little fire crackled between them.

Brian wandered around for a while, frowning. I had a feeling that he was planning something.

Suddenly, Brian snatched a burning twig from the boys' fire and put it in a little pile of hay that he'd built for himself.



It soon flared up. The trouble was, his fire was much too close to the haystack. I shouted at him to put the fire out. He just shook his head.





I spent so much time arguing with Brian that I didn't see what was about to happen. And it happened so quickly. A few sparks must have flown from the fire into the haystack.



Next thing I knew, there was smoke . . . then little flames
. . . then big flames.

The flames hissed and snaked up the bales of hay. They snapped like gunshots. We crept back. The flames crackled louder and grew bigger. We crept back further. The flames made a great cloud of smoke that got in our eyes and made us cough.

Then we panicked.



Brian and I ran home as fast as we could.

I told Mum what had happened.

Brian just hid under the table. He stayed there, shaking like a frightened puppy.





Later, we all went back to the fire. Mum held firmly on to Brian's hand. Smoke filled the sky. It was the biggest blaze I'd ever seen.



Suddenly, a fire-engine clanged down the avenue.
The jets of water from the fire-fighters' hoses made the
hay steam and crackle.

When we got back home, Brian hid under the table again. He looked very pale and guilty, and he refused to come out.

“You’d better stay there, then,” said Mum. She wouldn’t let me go under the table to comfort him.



Then the police knocked on the door. They said, "We think that your son, Brian, knows how this fire started. Can we talk to him?"

Mum had to drag Brian out from under the table. At first he was silent, but soon he told the truth.





Later that evening, we went down to look at the remains of the fire. Fire-fighters were still poking the embers, making sure that it was safe. The embers glowed in the dark.



Brian wasn't in disgrace for long.

The next day, some mums gathered outside the house, talking about the fire. They said to me, "Your Brian did one good thing, Joan. He got rid of the rats."

I ran back to tell Brian what they had said. That made him smile. And when the mums waved to him, his smile grew bigger and bigger. It was almost as big as the fire.



The Haystack

This is a true story about Joan and Brian Bailey. It happened when Joan and Brian were living in Yeovil in Somerset during the Second World War. Their father was in the army and their mother worked in a nearby glove factory.

*Brian on his tricycle at about
the time of the story*



My little brother, Brian, loved to play on the haystack near our house. Nobody realised just how dangerous that could be . . .



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